IOWA OUTDOORS

Iowa Department of Natural Resources
www.iowadnr.com

Editor: Mick Klemesrud, 515/281-8653
mick.klemesrud@dnr.state.ia.us

****

April 8, 2003

NORTHERN PIKE SPAWN UNDERWAY

By Joe Wilkinson
Iowa Department of Natural Resources

Coasting up to shore in a Mississippi River backwater, Karen Aulwes reaches for the pole. It stakes out a long hoop net, tethered in the shallows. Pulling the net on board, she spills the contents onto the deck of the aluminum Department of Natural Resources work boat. A writhing jumble of mottled dark green fish…and teeth…greet her, as she sorts northern pike.

The nets yield the brood fish for this year's northern spawn, carried out at the DNR's Guttenberg fisheries station. Aulwes, the fisheries technician, and Scott Gritters, the biologist stationed here, watch the water temperature carefully as April approaches. At 38 to 40 degrees, the northern seek out the shallows, to lay their eggs. If the Guttenberg crew gets to them first, the big northerns are ferried back to the riverbank hatchery, where humans step in for Mother Nature. "Some of these big nine or 10 pound females can release 100,000 eggs," comments Gritters, as he wrestles the fierce looking head under his elbow, so he can massage or 'strip' the fish's underside. A steady stream of golden eggs flows into a waiting pan. Next, a male fish is 'stripped' over the pan, providing a few drops of milky sperm. A saline solution is added and the whole mess is stirred for half a minute. The pan's contents are then poured into a clear, two-liter cylinder on the hatching rack, where a constant flow of water pours over them.

Guttenberg has a target of 1.2 million eggs, which normally yield about 800,000 fry in early April. As the viable eggs hatch, the crew gets busy again. "Almost all the fry will be shipped to the Spirit Lake hatchery," says Gritters. "They'll raise them to two-

inch fingerlings before they are stocked in rivers and lakes all across Iowa. We invest more time and expense in a hatchery setting, but survival is much better. We get a better return and a better return for anglers, by holding them until they're two inches."

Those anglers wouldn't see many northern, if not for the Guttenberg operation. "We have natural reproduction on the backwater lakes and wetlands of the Mississippi and Wapsipinicon rivers. Northerns need those backwaters to spawn. Most rivers have those wetlands drained. There is very poor spawning habitat," explains Gritters. "Your chance of catching a northern anywhere else would be pretty slim without the stocking program. Most of them are hatched right here."

Weather holds the trump card just about every year in the spawning program. It can deliver a bumper crop, or force fisheries crews to work harder for their quota. This year, a cold front moving through near the end of March seemed to shut down the natural spawning. The colder weather triggered an instinct in the fish, delaying…and reducing…egg production. Aulwes and Gritters were anticipating a shipment from Wisconsin's Genoa hatchery, in case of a local shortfall.

In a good year, there will be a 'bumper crop' of young northerns. There's no stockpiling this commodity, though. Its shelf life is short. Some are released in surplus stockings around Iowa. Others are 'traded' to another state, to pay for a fish or wildlife favor that Iowa may have.

The result is more northern in more Iowa waters. Not always a common target for anglers, the feisty fish is popular among anglers, probing shallow summer vegetation in the shallows. Northern also function as the predator at the top of the food chain in Iowa waters. Without them, prey species might overpopulate a fishery.

Countdown to Turkey Season
To Call or Not to Call

In the half-light, just ahead of dawn, a barred owl hoots in the woods. Roosting tom turkeys respond with 'shock' gobbles, from three different directions.

With a minimum of movement, you strike your peg to the slate, creating a quiet hen yelp, or a couple 'put' calls. Again, comes a gobble.

One of the big question marks in Iowa's spring turkey season is, 'To call or not to call?'. If so; what kind of call? How often? Do you switch from morning to midday? How about early versus late season? It's no wonder, turkey hunting vests have so many pockets. You need them to hold all the calls!

<u>Locater calls.</u>
"Mornings and evenings, there's not much better than an owl hoot," admits Rick White, staff pro from Hunter's Specialties outdoor products. "At dawn, it's usually the first sound in the woods. It's a great way to get a response and pinpoint that gobbler's

location." The familiar, "Who cooks for you? Who cooks for you-all" is fairly easy to imitate on a commercial call. With practice, hunters can mimic it themselves.

If hunting by yourself, White suggests sounding just the first note, in case that gobbler reply comes immediately. Otherwise, you may miss it. With a partner, stand 10 yards apart. One can listen while the other blows the full call. Once the turkey is located, though, concentrate on moving in…but not *too* close. "Set up no closer than 100, 150 yards," White urges. "A big mistake many hunters make is stepping in too close. Depending on the terrain, that turkey hears or see you and that's the end of that."

By midday, White switches to a crow call. The turkeys are on the ground by then and often a sudden, natural sound will evoke a response. A high pitched hawk call can 'get their goat', too. In the evening, he suggests that barred call again, or a coyote yelp, to pin down where a tom is roosting, for an opportunity the next morning. "Locater calls are never guaranteed," he acknowledges. "It depends on the attitude of the turkey."

Turkey calls.

Box calls. Mouth calls. Slates. Push button calls. Gobbler calls. Your success is usually tied to which one you can use best, and what the turkey is going to fall for that day.

Wafer-thin latex mouth calls can be used to work a tom that's in close. There is virtually no visible movement as you try to get a wary tom to raise his head or venture over the top of a hill. A variety of calls, and a little practice, will provide you a chorus line of invisible hens, each with a different attitude. On the down side, mouth calls are often hard to master, and are uncomfortable for lots of hunters.

Box calls take up room in your vest or belt-pack. You are handcuffed, too, if a gobbler heads in your direction while you—and your call--are not concealed. However, they do send a clear call across a pasture on a windy day when other calls are muffled. They are relatively easy to master, too. Push button calls work on the same friction principle and can be held in one hand, or even attached to the stock of your gun, for some close-range coaxing. I've never been able to get the sounds I want, with the push button.

Many 'slate' calls are made of plastic, acrylics or glass these days. Whatever their composition, though, you can create a flock full of turkey talk; from the low purr, to the content feeding 'put, put, put' to yelps ranging from aggressive to alluring.

Which is best? Why not all of them? "I have a whole bag full of calls," admits Todd Gosselink, forest research biologist for the Department of Natural Resources. "I typically try several things when I hunt turkeys. On one day, certain things work. On another day, they don't. Vary the call, to match with what yields a response from the birds."

###

DNR STRESSES SAFETY AS RECORD NUMBER OF TURKEY HUNTERS TAKE TO WOODLANDS

By Lowell Washburn, Iowa Department of Natural Resources

Imagine this. It's Opening Day of the spring turkey hunting season and you're patiently sitting guard over a lone decoy. It's a picture perfect morning, and you are all alone in the turkey woods -- or so you think.

It's been nearly an hour since the last gobbler sounded off, and the warmth of the spring sunlight is beginning to make your eyelids heavy. You're thinking that maybe it's time to pick up and move on down the ridge.

That's when it happens. From less than a stone's throw away, a shotgun blast suddenly shatters the silence. Traveling in excess of 1,300 feet per second, a magnum charge of #4 shot rips through the understory and ultimately places a dozen holes into its intended target -- which is, of course, your turkey decoy.

Fortunately, the hunter wasn't injured. The shot charge passed several yards to the left of his tree. He was plenty scared, however. So scared, in fact, that he decided to sit out the remainder of the season. Today, that fateful hunt is simply a bad, but never to be forgotten, memory.

THE 2003 IOWA TURKEY HUNTING SEASON begins Monday, April 14. By the time the final segment of this year's four part, split season concludes on May 18, an estimated 50,000-plus hunters will have taken to the state's forests in search of America's most challenging gamebird.

Nationwide, turkey hunting is considered to be the most dangerous of all shooting sports. And although there have been some serious accidents here, Iowa's safety record compares very favorably with those of other states.

But just a single mishap is one too many. The following are some classic examples of turkey hunting horror stories. All are true. All occurred in Iowa. All were the result of pure negligence.

Some of the stories have become famous. If you are already familiar with one or more of these tragic tales, I'd encourage you to read them again. If you're an Iowa turkey hunter, my sole intention is to make you think -- so hard that you'll never be the subject of one of these columns.

DURING THE 1992 spring season, two hunters were sitting together in a gooseberry patch. One of the men was working a turkey call. Another hunter heard the calls, crept in and fired a shot into the cover. He heard leaves rustle, and immediately fired again. He soon discovered his mistake. The first shot had instantly killed one of the hunters; and the second round had critically wounded the other.

In 1995, two hunters were walking through the timber when they spotted a turkey decoy. Not wanting to disturb the other hunter, the pair turned to tip toe away. One of the men was wearing a hooded sweatshirt with a white liner. The hunter with the decoy saw the white, mistook it for a gobbler's head, and fired. Both of the retreating hunters were struck.

In the spring of 1996, a hunter decided to video tape two of his partners who were hunting over a decoy in a woodland clearing. The only problem was that his buddies didn't know the plan. While crawling into position, the man with the camera was mistaken for game. A shot was fired at 33 yards, and the photographer took 28 pellets to the head. He lived, but lost one eye. There is still a possibility he will one day regain sight in the other.

In 1997, my friend Steve Suman became a shooting victim when another hunter mistook him for a gobbler, and opened fire. Of course, that's how almost all turkey hunting accidents happen.

Physicians were able to remove all but two pellets -- both of which were lodged in the neck. Last time I talked to Steve, those pellets were still there. One is located halfway between the jawbone and ear lobe. The other pellet entered the cheek and is currently resting near the upper spine. Because of the tremendous number of nerves found in those areas, surgeons are reluctant to go in and it is likely that these somber souvenirs will be there forever.

The good news is that Steve is alive and still hunting turkeys, which is about as happy an ending as you're likely to get in the accident business.

IT IS important to keep in mind that stories like those you've just read are extremely rare. Such events require a highly specialized set of circumstances and an extreme lapse in good judgement. In most years, there have been no turkey hunting mishaps reported anywhere in Iowa. However, during the 1995 and 1996 seasons, two accidents occurred each year.

Regardless of how you slice it, turkey hunting represents an extremely intense, high octane sport. The desire to succeed runs high, and when emotions override good judgment -- the stage is set for disaster.

FORTUNATELY, there are some things a hunter can do to minimize the risk of being mistaken for game. Here are my favorite four safety tips.

1] Never wear any clothing that contains red or white. Avoid red bandannas, and leave the white socks and Tee shirts back in camp. Remember, red and white are the primary colors of a spring gobbler's head.

2] When working a bird, always sit against a tree that is at least as wide as your shoulders. That will keep you from being shot in the back. Always try to set up where

you have a clear, 180-degree view of what's going on around you. This not only increases your chances of bagging a turkey, but also decreases your chance of "being bagged."

3] Although they are extremely effective in the right situations, most safety instructors advise hunters NOT to use calls that imitate the sound of a gobbler. Gobbler shakers are just as likely to draw other hunters as they are to attract toms.

4] When you see another hunter approaching through the woods - NEVER wave to get the other person's attention. Instead remain perfectly motionless, and alert the hunter with your voice. "Stop" or "Don't shoot" are good commands.

Like most things in life, safe and successful turkey hunting is merely a matter of common sense.

Spring Ritual Something to Behold

For the next month and a half, Iowa's hardwood timbers will echo with the staccato, rattling call of the Eastern wild turkey. It's the spring gobbling season. On a clear, windless morning these raucous vocalizations can be heard intermittently from before daylight until dusk.

For a tom turkey, gobbling serves a dual purpose. The noise not only attracts hens, but also aids in establishing social ranking among adult toms.

Males are highly competitive. When it comes to strutting his stuff, no one does it better than a wild turkey. From now until at least mid-May, adult gobblers will spend the majority of their daylight hours marching back and forth across their woodland domains while displaying the traditional "Thanksgiving pose". Whenever dominant gobblers happen to cross paths, fierce territorial battles are likely to erupt. These 20-plus pound birds play for keeps, and the ultimate victor is determined by who has the sharpest spurs and strongest wings. If you ever have a firsthand opportunity to see these deep woods monarchs do battle, it's an outdoor event that you'll be talking about for days.

###

PLAN NOW FOR 2004 PHEASANT FOOD PLOTS

BOONE - Now is the time to begin planning food plots for next winter. Each winter food plots of corn, sorghum, or other grains are used by all kinds of wildlife for winter survival. According to Todd Bogenschutz, wildlife research biologist with the Department of Natural Resources, food shortages were not a problem during the past winter for most of Iowa’s wildlife, including pheasants. The winter of 2002-03 was dry and mild; so most of Iowa’s upland wildlife should be in very good condition this spring, he said. However, next winter could be like the severe winter of 2000-01 when food plots played a very important role for upland wildlife. The time to plan for next winter is now.

"There have been few documented cases of pheasants actually starving to death in Iowa," Bogenschutz said. "Virtually all of Iowa's winter mortality is attributed to severe winter storms with the birds freezing to death."

So why plant food plots for pheasants if they seldom starve in winter? Well, a couple of reasons. First, food plots provide winter habitat as well as food. In fact, if properly designed and large enough, the habitat created by a food plot can be more beneficial to wildlife than the food itself. Second, food plots allow pheasants to obtain a quick meal thereby limiting their exposure to predators and maximizing their energy reserves. "If hens have good fat supplies coming out of the winter, they are more likely to nest successfully," said Bogenschutz. Food plots also provide habitat and food for many other species like deer, turkey, partridge, squirrels, and songbirds.

Bogenschutz offers the following suggestions for planning food plots for pheasants:

1. Corn and sorghum grains provide the most reliable food source throughout the winter as they resist lodging in heavy snows. Pheasants prefer corn to sorghum, although sorghum provides better winter habitat. Sorghum is also less attractive to deer, if deer are a problem.

2. Place food plots away from tall deciduous trees (that provide raptors with a place sit and watch food plots) and next to wetlands, CRP fields, and multi-row shrub-conifer shelterbelts that provide good winter habitat.

3. Size of food plots depends upon where they are placed. If the plot is next to good winter cover the smaller (2 acres minimum) the plot can be. If winter cover is marginal (e.g., ditch) then plots must be larger (5 to 10 acres) to provide cover as well as food.

4. Depending on the amount of use some food plots can be left for 2 years. The weedy growth that follows in the second year provides excellent nesting, brood-rearing, and winter habitat for pheasants and other upland wildlife. Food plots that have heavy deer use generally need to be replanted every year.

Cost-share assistance for food plot establishment is available from most county Pheasants Forever chapters and in some cases the Iowa DNR. People can also contact their local wildlife biologist for information on how to establish and design food plots that benefit wildlife.

For more information, contact Bogenschutz at 515-432-2823.

###

SPECIAL SNOW GOOSE SEASON ENDS APRIL 15

DES MOINES – The special spring conservation order snow goose season will close on April 15. The special spring season, set by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, is used to reduce the number of snow geese migrating to arctic tundra. The population of snow geese has grown to the point where the geese are damaging their fragile Canadian breeding grounds.

###